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SUBJECT: ANGOLAN JOURNALIST IMPRISONED FOR DEFAMATION

REF: LUANDA 723

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On October 3, Graca Campos, the outspoken director of the privately-owned weekly newspaper "Semanario Angolense," was sentenced to eight months in prison (two months more than the maximum legal sentence) and an unprecedented 250,000 USD fine following his conviction on defamation charges stemming from a 2001 case. Local civil society (including NGOs and the media) are pressuring the GRA and higher courts to review the Campos case, with some success. While still too early to confirm, local civil society groups caution that this could be the first in a series of moves aimed at silencing critics in the run-up to the elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Graca Campos and his weekly newspaper, Semanario Angolense, are well-known in Angola for publishing critical articles concerning GRA policies and leaders. The defamation charges against Campos date back to 2001, when then Minister of Justice (current Human Rights Ombudsman) Paulo Tjipilica accused Campos of publishing defamatory articles alleging embezzlement and the improper use of his position to return seized property to Portuguese citizens. The case against Campos was suspended in 2003 but reactivated by Tjipilica in 2004 when the Minister accused Campos of continuing to publish defamatory stories. No ruling on the case was made for over three years, despite repeated requests by Campos' legal team for a final determination.

¶3. (U) In the midst of Semanario Angolense's reporting on the Miala trial in August 2007 (reftel), Tjipilica's case against Campos came before a judge. Campos' attorney states his client was not notified of the trial, and that Campos was out of the country at the time the hearing was scheduled. Campos was tried in absentia and found guilty. On October 3, Campos, who claims he did not know he had already been convicted, appeared before the court (thinking he was arriving for opening arguments), received his eight month sentence, and was remanded to jail immediately. Campos' request for a suspended sentence pending appeal was denied by the trial judge.

¶4. (U) Media and civil society groups reacted strongly to the case's many irregularities. Private newspapers prominently covered the case, with Semanario Angolense leading the charge. Even the state-run daily newspaper Jornal de Angola, which normally steers clear of issues critical of the GRA, ran a front page article on a vigil organized for Campos by human rights NGO Maos Livres. At least in part due to the public pressure from civil society, the President of Luanda's Provincial Court agreed to review Campos' case; his ruling is expected by October 19.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: It is possible that a series of unfortunate events make the Graca Campos case more about judicial incompetence than media censorship. However, there are reports surfacing that the government has also started legal proceedings against David Mendes, a well known government

critic and human rights activist. Regardless if the GRA is to blame for the excessive sentence and fine handed down to Campos, the decision will have a chilling affect on journalists who already acknowledge they practice self-censorship to avoid government action. While the reaction of local NGOs to the Campos case is encouraging, the fact that other government critics may be facing legal action bears monitoring. END COMMENT.
FERNANDEZ